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ABSTRACT

This article discusses community colleges as educational institutions that not only prepare students to transfer to other colleges, but also receive transfer students from other institutions as well. The article emphasizes the limited awareness of this transfer reciprocity, both on part of the general public and of policymakers. Cited are the results of a 1998 study that uncovered the existence of multiple transfer patterns. While 52% of the students followed the "typical" transfer path, another 13% attended two community colleges before enrolling at the university, 22% attended a four-year school before enrolling in a community college and then a university, and 13% of the students followed a different pattern. In addition, 8% of the university students enrolled concurrently at both a community college and a university. The article aims to communicate to policymakers the following points in understanding student transfer: (1) the transfer function or niche of community colleges is a complex function; and (2) the community college also serves students who already have a bachelor's degree or higher. To the general public, this article advises: (1) the two-year college is the transfer institution of choice for many students; and (2) attending a two-year college is a highly satisfactory experience for many students, including those students who have attended a four-year college. Table 1 summarizes institutional attendance patterns. Contains 14 references. (AS)

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Telling the Community College Story:
The Transfer Function

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> No student enters a four-year college or university expecting to drop out or leave without graduating. (Southern Education Foundation, 1995, p. 36)

This recent quotation from a foundation's report about the education of non-white students is typical of many policymakers' and perhaps the general public's perspective on college attendance. They still believe that most students plan to graduate from the college at which they first matriculate and that if they don't graduate from there, it is the institution's fault. In reality, only about a third of college graduates actually matriculate at the institution from which they receive their degree. Many students, including four-year college ones, intend to transfer from the college where they initially enroll (Kearney, Townsend, & Kearney, 1995).

Student transfer is a fact of life. That statement seems obvious to community college administrators and faculty since transfer, moving students from two-year schools to four-year schools, is one of their major functions or missions.

Less obvious or well known, though, at least by policy makers and the general public, is that the community college is not just an institution FROM which students transfer. The community college is also an institution TO which students transfer--sometimes from other two-year colleges and sometimes from four-year colleges. From a systemic perspective, the two-year college is but one institution in what de los Santos and Wright (1990) have called the "transfer swirl."

There is limited awareness of this transfer swirl, both on the part of the general public and of policy makers, including those who work with transfer and articulation policies. One illustration of policy makers' lack of awareness is found in the quotation with which I began. Another illustration is found in the web pages of state agencies focusing on higher education or community colleges. Assuming these pages reflect the agencies' perspectives on transfer, the pages (and thus the agencies) illustrate tremendous variation in the extent to which policy makers understand the transfer swirl and students' switching among institutions. Many of the states seem to view transfer as occurring only in one direction--from two-year colleges to four-year colleges.

A few states reflect cognizance of the complexity and multifaceted nature of transfer. For example, on the web page for the Oregon State System of Higher Education (1999), there is an extensive report about transfer and articulation. The report reflects an awareness of the transfer swirl among institutions:

> According to a 1996 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, only about 37 percent of the students who earn a baccalaureate degree do so from the school at which they first matriculated. Third, student movement between and among institutions is not necessarily linear (e.g., two years at a community college followed

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by two years at a university). Several recent studies document the multiple patterns of student movement in their pursuit of higher education (e.g., Kearney et al., at a large public Midwestern university, 1995; Kinnick et al., at PSU, 1997).

Illinois is another state that reflects on its web pages an awareness of the transfer swirl. For example, the web site for the Illinois Articulation Initiative (1999) presents a table on student transfer in Illinois for Fall 1997. The table shows that not only did 10,795 community college students transfer to public universities within the state, but also almost 3,500 community college students transferred to other community colleges. Additionally, almost 3,400 students transferred from public universities to community colleges.

At the institutional level, there may be awareness of this phenomenon, particularly if two-year colleges and four-year colleges collaborate to research the complexity of transfer. One such collaboration occurred in Tennessee in 1998, when the University of Memphis, in conjunction with four area two-year schools, examined the institutional attendance patterns of students who had last transferred from one of the four schools to the University. The population for the study was all students who (1) entered the University in Fall 1994 or subsequent semesters through Spring 1998, (2) were still enrolled in the Spring 1998 semester, and (3) had accumulated at least 18 credit hours from one of four area two-year colleges. As Table 1 indicates, just over 50% of the students who transferred during this time period took what is considered to be the "typical" transfer path: going from one two-year college to a four-year college (Townsend, 1998a).

This study also uncovered another transfer phenomenon: University students who transfer back and forth between the University and a two-year college so that they can earn summer credits at a community college. Additionally, eight percent of the University students enrolled at the community college at the same time they were enrolling at the University. This simultaneous enrollment enabled them to transfer in two-year college credits at the same time they were University students. Incidentally, each institution would be counting these students at "their" students, thus inflating the actual number of students enrolled in public higher education in the state.

What Needs to Be Communicated to Policy Makers

To ensure that policy makers understand the complexity of the transfer function for community colleges, community college leaders need to collaborate with the leaders of four-year colleges and universities to convey the following messages to policy makers:

(1) The transfer function or niche of community colleges is a complex function.

In fulfilling this function, the community college does not just provide the first step in the upward ladder to a baccalaureate degree. Rather, the community college not only serves two-year students who later transfer to four-year institutions, but it also serves two-year students who transfer to other two-year colleges, and four-year students who have transferred to two-year schools. This last group of students is sometimes referred to as Undergraduate Reverse Transfer Students (URTS) (Townsend, in press).

(2) As part of its multi-faceted transfer function, the community college also serves an unusual group of students: those individuals who already have a bachelor's degree or higher.

The percentage of post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students (PRTS), or individuals who have at least a bachelor's degree, varies tremendously from institution to institution. At small, rural two-year schools, less than one percent of the students may be PRTS, while at urban community colleges or suburban ones in a middle-class area, at least 25% of the students may be PRTS, e.g., Piedmont Community College in Charlottesville, Virginia (Klepper, 1991). These students choose to attend the community college, sometimes for personal development but increasingly for career change and advancement. These students are sometimes called post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students (PRTS) (Townsend, in press).

What Needs to Be Communicated to the General Public

The general public also needs to understand some things about the community college and transfer students.

(1) The two-year college is the transfer institution of choice for many students, and not just two-year students who plan eventually to transfer to a four-year college.

The two-year college is an excellent, low-cost way of obtaining the first two years of a bachelor's degree. That fact is obvious and most people are well aware of it. However, they may be far less aware that many undergraduate four-year college students, as well as individuals who already have a bachelor's degree or higher, transfer to the community college, because they see it as serving needs unmet by four-year colleges.

(2) Attending the two-year college is a highly satisfactory experience for many students, including those students who have attended a four-year college.

Studies repeatedly indicate that both undergraduate reverse transfers and post-baccalaureate reverse transfers are highly satisfied with their experiences at the two-year college, sometimes even more satisfied than with their four-year experiences (e.g., Hill-Brown, 1989; Kajstura, & Keim, 1992; Kearney, Townsend, & Kearney, 1995; Kuznik, 1972; Losak, 1980; Townsend, 1998b).

In sum, both policy makers and the general public need to hear how transfer is not just a one-way path, leading from community colleges to four-year colleges. Rather, community college administrators and faculty need to tell the story of the transfer swirl and the growing number of students who transfer TO the community college as a place that better fits their needs than does the four-year college. This is a story that deserves to be told. Telling it can only benefit the community college.

Table 1. Summary Table of Institutional Attendance Patterns

Transfer Pattern	Total	
	Number	% Within Sample
From Two-Year School to University	312	52
From Two-Year School to Two-Year School to University	81	13
From Four-Year School to Two-Year to University	131	22
Other Patterns	81	13
Total	605	100

Summer Sessioner +	29	05
Simultaneous Enroller	51	08

+ Does not include students who simultaneously enroll at the university and a two-year college during the summer. These students are classified as simultaneous enrollers.

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